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ABSTRACT

A study examined communication skills essential for small work groups and whether the quality of small group teaching and research is in decline. The study reviewed small group research done previously by others and the problem of existing pedagogy and research in small group communication which does not provide practical solutions to real life problems. The study instrument was based on an analysis of in-depth interviews with six managers representing five major corporations and a national government agency, all based in a large midwestern city. Thirteen specific communication skills were identified as vital for employee success in the workplace. A small group was defined as being from 3-20 members. Results from the 38 (76%) completed survey forms returned by recipients, the personnel directors of each of the top 50 employers, revealed that the reliability of the survey was acceptably high. Respondents agreed most strongly with the statement that effective listening was important, and least strongly with the importance of the ability to make effective information presentations. Other important communication skills listed by 14 respondents were interpersonal communication climate and demonstration of leadership in keeping the group task oriented; 27 responses agreed on the importance of effective small group communication. Findings suggest that for small group research to be applicable to groups that operate in the real world, it must be conducted in contexts that at least approximate real life. (One table of data, 24 references, and the survey form are appended.) (CR)

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Perceived Communication Skill Needs for Small Work Groups

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Perceived Communication Skill Needs for Small Work Groups

The purpose of this paper is to identify communication skills recognized as essential for success in small work group contexts, and to encourage small group teachers, researchers and practitioners to focus their attention on the development of these critical communication skills in real life small work groups. Results from interviews and a survey conducted with a sample of personnel managers revealed that there were thirteen communication skills considered important for success in small work group settings, the most critical of which was effective listening.

Perceived Communication Skill Needs for Small Work Groups

Some have suggested that small group research and pedagogy are in decline. For example, Cragan and Wright's (1980) review of small group research in the 1980s listed 114 articles published in the area in that decade. Their review of such published articles in the 1990s only listed 96 articles, a decline of sixteen percent (Cragan & Wright, 1990). In the sense of sheer quantity, then, one could say that published small group research is in decline.

A larger and more important issue, however, is whether or not the quality of small group teaching and research is in decline. The position taken in this essay is that much small group pedagogy and research is flawed in that it fails to provide practical solutions to the real life communication problems of average people in their everyday lives.

Regarding theory and research, a number of communication scholars have argued that theories may be evaluated on their ability to provide practical solutions to real world problems. Littlejohn (1992) argues that in order for a theory to be considered valid, it must demonstrate utility and have pragmatic value. In other words, it should be useful and practical. Infante, Rancer and Womack (1993) point out that a theory may be judged on its interpretability, or connection to the real world. According to Infante and his associates, "If a theory is difficult for scientists to relate to the real world, the theory has little value...." (p. 61). Poole (1990) lists three criteria for good small group communication theories. Among these is the necessity

for a focus on meaningful and important concerns. Specifically, a good theory addresses the concerns of ordinary people: "It enhances people's understanding of and control over their lives" (p. 238). As long ago as 1980, Becker (1980) called for more small group research to be applied to society's problems. Has it? Sadly, the answer appears to be no.

Poole (1990) argues that small group theory and research has failed to address real world problems. The case in point he presents is that of the large body of literature regarding functional requisites for effective decision making in small groups. It is fair to single out this literature, according to Poole, as it represents one of the few programmatic efforts in the area of small group research. The failure of this body of research to address real world problems appears in several forms. Two will be presented here: unrealistic operationalization of outcomes and focus on a too narrow range of outcomes studied.

First, many who study decision-making in groups use measures of effectiveness and/or satisfaction as dependent variables. The problem occurs in the operationalization, or measurement of the variables. Measures of effectiveness rarely assess anything other than the demonstrable correctness of a group's solution to an unrealistic, overly simplistic decision making scenario.

In real life, decision making scenarios are rarely simple. Stacks and Hocking (1992) describe three different types of questions: fact, value and policy. While questions of fact may have demonstrably correct answers, questions of value and policy

do not. Therefore, it may be difficult to assess the effectiveness of decisions made by real life groups who address questions of value and policy (e.g., school boards, city councils, quality circles). According to Wood, Phillips and Pederson (1986), "Attempting to measure the quality of group decisions with precision is virtually impossible" (p. 50).

In a like manner, measures of satisfaction typically used in small group research are inadequate to address the concerns of real life groups. According to Poole (1990), most investigators employ short-term measures of satisfaction that may be based on factors irrelevant to practical concerns. For example, it has been demonstrated that those who participate in small groups with physically attractive group members are more satisfied with their experience than those whose fellow group members are not as physically attractive (Rosenthal, 1978). How meaningful are such short term measures of satisfaction if they can be significantly affected by such an extraneous variable? Ignoring critical long-term group processes such as group cohesiveness and group motivation limit the pragmatic value of much small group research.

Second, Poole (1990) suggests that the range of outcomes addressed by small group researchers is too narrow. It is true that small groups are often called upon to make decisions. However, it is equally true that small groups engage in a variety of other communication activities that have little direct applicability to decision making (e.g., facilitate learning, provide opportunities for social interaction). Devoting so much attention to decision making limits the utility of small group

theory and research for the wide variety of groups that populate the real world. Sykes (1990) asks:

> ...why should our primary attention be on decision making small groups when we do not even know what percent of small groups in the real world are decision making or whether decision making is merely one task that all groups occasionally appear to do? (p. 208)

Finally, numerous critics of small group research in general have decried the repeated use of concocted, zero history ad hoc groups as the focus of study (for example, Putnam & Stohl, 1990). Cragan and Wright (1990) found that only 6 of 96 articles (6.25 percent) published in the area of small group communication in the last decade described research in applied settings. According to Putnam and Stohl (1990), most small group research ignores common characteristics of real world groups such as fluctuations in group membership, simultaneous memberships in diverse groups, and group members' representation of external constituencies within the small group.

A related problem is that much small group research focuses on laboratory groups whose duration is extremely short. Many real life groups, especially work groups, have very long durations. Communication processes, such as interpersonal conflict, that may not be manifested in an hour may emerge full blown in a year. In summary, generalizability of findings from unrealistic laboratory groups to real world small groups is limited. It

follows that the utility of this research for the resolution of real world problems is questionable.

Neither is instruction in small group communication without fault. Although review of the relevant literature revealed no recent review of small group communication textbooks, personal experience over the past decade leads to the conclusion that most textbooks in the area focus on methods for rational group discussion and decision making (see, for example, Wood, Philips and Pederson (1986)). Although the journal literature reveals some interesting suggestions for alternative approaches to small group pedagogy (see, for example, Capuzza (1993), and Johnson & Iacobucci (1995)), small group communication texts appear to lag somewhat behind. As Sykes (1990) and others have argued, formal decision making is but one activity undertaken by small groups.

Small group communication texts usually include some mention of interpersonal skills necessary for small group functioning. However, these guidelines are often based on research conducted in dyadic, as opposed to small group settings. This practice could be problematic. For example, it can be argued that dyadic listening, where one can focus one's entire attention on a single speaker, is not identical to listening in a small group setting, where several people may be speaking simultaneously. Another example is in the study of interpersonal conflict. One cannot justify equating a conflict between two people interacting in private even with that same conflict acted out in the context of a small group. Communication processes such as coalition formation, not present in the first instance, must be considered in

the latter. It's reasonable to suggest that in order for communication pedagogy to be applicable to small groups, it must be grounded in a small group context.

The problem is clear. Much of the existing pedagogy and research in small group communiation does not provide practical solutions to real life problems. The solution is just as clear. In order for small group pegagogy and research to regain its vitality and usefulness for small group practitioners, it must: a) identify real life problems encountered in small groups that operate in the real world, and b) provide practical solutions for those problems. Sykes (1990) suggests, "would it not be appropriate to identify the kinds of small groups that exist in the real world and the kinds of messages that are exchanged in such groups? (p.208)" Certainly one kind of group that exists in the real world in great abundance is the work group, or task-oriented group. The report that follows provides a preliminary answer to the question of characteristic communication within such groups.

Method

The survey instrument used in this investigation was based on an analysis of depth interviews conducted with six managers representating five major corporations and a national government agency, all based in a large midwestern city. The corporations represented a variety of industries operating in the area. All of the managers had extensive experience in the area of personnel. The interviews were conducted by two education professionals as part of a larger investigation on oral language proficiency skills.

Interviewees were asked a variety of questions regarding the importance of communication skills in the workplace, as well as about their expectations for oral language skills proficiency for those occupying entry level positions in their organizations. All interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed for analysis.

The transcribed interviews were content analyzed to identify communication skills mentioned by the interviewees as being necessary for employee success in the workplace. In the first step in the analysis, the interview transcripts were reviewed, highlighting passages relevant to effective workplace communication skills. These excerpts were then analyzed to identify specific oral communication skills stressed by the interviewees.

The excerpts were independently sorted into categories based on perceived similarity. This process continued until all the excerpts were sorted such that each category reflected a specific and distinct communication skill. All excerpts were categorized and no one excerpt could be counted in more than one category, resulting in a mutually exclusive and exhaustive category scheme (Stacks & Hocking, 1992). The analysis described is consistent with Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory approach (see also Bogdan & Taylor, 1975 on discovering themes and formulating hypotheses from qualitative data), an approach suitable for the exploratory nature of this investigation.

The analysis revealed thirteen specific communication skills mentioned by at least some of the managers as being vital for employee success in the workplace:

1. Use clear, concise, accurate and professional language when speaking to others.

2. Nonverbally convey a professional image to others (e.g., appropriate grooming and attire, good posture, etc.).

3. Listen effectively; be able to discern important elements of others' messages to them.

4. Establish and maintain good professional rapport with others.

5. Recognize and aid in the resolution of conflict.

6. Be an active contributing member of a problem solving discussion on a familiar topic.

7. Give a brief, clear, coherent and well-organized informative presentation on a familiar topic.

8. Receive information on a familiar topic and transmit an accurate summary of that information to others.

9. Give clear and accurate instructions to others.

10. Ask clear questions to obtain needed information from others.

11. Understand (and be able to articulate to others) their roles and responsibilities as part of the larger group effort.

12. Communicate effectively with people with different cultural backgrounds.

13. Communicate effectively with people with different professional backgrounds.

A survey form was then developed based on these thirteen communication skills as manifested in a small work group setting (see Appendix). Specifically, respondents were asked to use a five point Likert scale (from 5 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly

disagree) to respond to statements that it was important for members of small work groups to be able to exhibit each of the thirteen communication skills listed above. A small group was defined as being from three to approximately twenty members, a definition consistent with many used in the study of small groups (Hare, 1976).

Two open-ended questions were added to the survey, as follows:

1. Are there other communication skills (not listed) that you feel are important for members of small work groups? If so, what are they?

2. In your opinion, how important is it for your employees to be able to communicate effectively within a small group setting? Why?

The first question provided a test for exhaustiveness of the list of communication skills provided in the survey form. The inclusion of the second question was to provide an alternative form to test the assumption that effective small group communication is important for employee success.

The survey form, along with a cover letter explaining the purpose of the investigation, was sent to the Director of Personnel (or person serving in a like capacity) of each of the top fifty employers (ranked by permanent full-time employees) in a large midwestern city (Perkins & Burroughs, 1994). The population composition compares favorably to the national norms, making it a fairly representative sample. The respondents represented a variety of businesses, industries and government agencies,

including aviation, medicine, banking, and a variety of consumer products. The employers ranged in size from 325 to over 15,000 full-time employees, with 1993 annual payrolls from 3.6 million to over 866 million dollars.

Results

Thirty-eight (76 percent) completed survey forms were returned. Results showed that the reliability of the survey was acceptably high (alpha = .74). Tabulated results are displayed in Table 1.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

As can be seen, respondents agreed or strongly agreed that all of the communication skills listed were important for members of small work groups. Respondents agreed most strongly with the statement that effective listening was important, and least strongly with the importance of the ability to make an effective informative presentation in a small group context.

A content analysis of the fourteen affirmative responses to the first open-ended question revealed two general areas of additional skills not specifically mentioned in the survey. The first and most frequently mentioned dealt with the maintenance of a pleasant interpersonal communication climate, including such things as being able to disagree without suffering negative interpersonal consequences, being able to admit mistakes and accepting others' mistakes graciously, accepting differences in interpersonal style and keeping emotions low-keyed. A second area addressed demonstrating leadership by keeping the group

task-oriented and taking full advantage of group members' varying experience and expertise in addressing the group task.

Twenty-seven respondents chose to respond to the second question addressing the importance of effective small group communication. All responded in the affirmative. Respondents variously characterized effective small group communication skills as important, very important, extremely important, vitally important and critical. The following is a sampling of respondents' comments, highlighting different motivations for a belief in the importance of small group communication skills:

> Clear and concise communication is important for understanding and accepting the mission, and each person's role with respect to that mission.
>
> Focus is increasingly on work teams and quality improvement teams, as well as fewer levels of supervision.
>
> The ability to convey their ideas clearly as well as to listen to others with an open mind--this is necessary for problem solving and planning.
>
> Most individuals in our system who are less successful than is desired are hindered by their inability to work with others, not due to incompetence.

Clearly, respondents voiced a strong belief in the importance of effective small group communication skills for employee success in the workplace, and ultimately, overall organizational success. In the words of one respondent, "Individuals must continuosly rely on one another to accomplish the goals of the organization."

Another states that communication is important "to accomplish the goals of the group with ultimate accountability for (reaching) company objectives."

Discussion

According to the results of the survey, respondents agreed most strongly with the statement that it is important for members of small work groups to be able to listen effectively. Respondents agreed least strongly that it is important for workers to be able to give an informative presentation in a small group setting. Overall, respondents agreed that all thirteen skills listed, along with the maintenance of a pleasant interpersonal climate and the exercise of leadership, are important for members of small work groups. Given the perceived importance of listening ability in real life small groups, however, one would hope to find numerous references to listening in the small group literature. Such is not the case.

COMINDEX is an electronic author and title index to the core literature in the communication discipline. The index contains 22,412 references from 71 scholarly and professional journals dating from 1962 to the present in the broad area of communication research (with new references entered periodically to keep the index updated). It seems fair to assume that the COMINDEX contains references representative of the extant research literature in communication.

COMINDEX contains 67 references to listening skills. There is a consensus in the literature that a) listening skills are perceived as important in business and professional contexts, and

that b) listening skills in these contexts are perceived to be deficient (Hunt & Cusella, 1983; Wolvin & Coakley, 1991). However, a review of this literature identifies not one single citation specifically addressing listening in small group settings. Even a review of those few articles that address listening in a task-oriented environment revealed only one that directly mentioned listening in a group setting. Hunt and Cusella (1983), in a field study of listening needs in organizational contexts, found that meetings and problem-solving sessions (which may be assumed to be group contexts at least part of the time) were among those settings ranked as the most likely settings for listening problems to occur. Hunt and Cusella's presumed reference to listening in work group settings appears to stand alone in the extant literature on listening, which seems to focus almost exclusively on listening in an interpersonal context (see, for example, Smeltzer & Watson (1985)).

Decision making in small groups was very well represented, however. Of the 221 references to decision making processes in the COMINDEX, 44 of them specifically addressed small groups. It's interesting to note that decision making skills, per se, were never mentioned by any of the personnel or human resource managers either interviewed or surveyed for the brief research report described above.

Some might argue that's it's unfair to limit such a review to only those references specific to small groups. Some might take the position that there is no dearth of research on communication processes such as listening. One has merely to apply that

which has been studied in an interpersonal context to the small group context. As was argued earlier, however, a more defensible position is that it is a fallacy to equate the interpersonal and small group contexts, treating them as interchangeable for the purposes of teaching and research.

Another important point is that small group teaching and research must be practiced with and in reference to genuine small groups. Examples include existing work groups in organizations, community groups such as school boards or social and learning groups, such as those associated with church membership. Small group communication teachers could incorporate observation or simulation of such real life groups as part of their curriculums. As regards small group research, field studies, participant observations, and depth interviews of such groups and their members could provide rich data for small group researchers.

Much of the responsibility for the problem, and therefore, for the solution, rests with small group researchers. As Frey states, "Small group communication researchers, all too often, are own own worst enemy" (1994, p. 3). For example, Putnam and Stohl (1990) warn that ecological validity, or the quality of "true-to-lifeness," is sacrificed when small group researchers focus almost exclusively on task-oriented interactions in self-contained groups. They recommend attention to bona fide groups, "groups shaped by and developed within context interdependence and permeable boundaries" (p. 261). That is, small groups should be studied not in sterile laboratory environments, but in real life, where factors such as family obligations, political

affiliations, and career and geographic mobility affect group behavior. For those whose research requires more control, carefully crafted simulations using full-fledged groups may be appropriate (see Poole, 1983). The main point is that in order for small group research to be applicable to groups that operate in the real world, it must be conducted in contexts that at least approximate real life.

Having argued this point, it's interesting to note that much of the research regarding listening skills is self-report in nature (see, for example, Golen (1990) and Sypher, Bostrom and Seifert (1989)), with all of the attending problems of self-report measures. It follows that good advice for small group researchers interested in assessing listening skills and needs should conduct their studies in real life small group settings, using more direct measures of behavior (e.g., unobtrusive observation, diaries, directed role plays, etc.). Given the perceived interest in listening training (Wolvin & Coakley, 1991), it would seem that such research would be welcomed by those who teach small group communication skills and by communication professionals operating in business and professional settings.

Finally, small group researchers can and should do more to share their findings in ways that provide small group communication teachers and practitioners with workable solutions to their critical concerns. Too often, the leap from research to pedagogy and practice receives limited attention in communication research. Although business communication journals and some newly created journals in applied communication research show promise

for addressing this concern, trade, professional and popular journals provide an effective outlet for sharing practical information, as well. In an era when the public calls for accountability in higher education grow, publishing the results of communication research in such "user friendly" outlets could be to the discipline's advantage.

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Appendix

Work Group Communication Survey

Please use the following scale to respond to each of the statements given below:

5 = strongly agree
4 = agree
3 = neither agree nor disagree; neutral
2 = disagree
1 = strongly disagree

It is important for members of small work groups (that is, from 3 to approximately 20 members) to be able to:

_____ 1. Use clear, concise, accurate and professional language when speaking to others in their work group.
_____ 2. Nonverbally convey a professional image to others in their work group (such as appropriate grooming and attire, good posture, etc.).
_____ 3. Listen effectively; be able to discern important elements of others' messages to them.
_____ 4. Establish and maintain good professional rapport with others in the work group.
_____ 5. Recognize and aid in the resolution of conflicts within the work group.
_____ 6. Be an active contributing member of a problem solving work group discussion on a familiar topic.
_____ 7. Give a brief, clear, coherent and well-organized informative presentation on a familiar topic to members of their work group.
_____ 8. Receive information on a familiar topic and transmit an accurate summary of that information to members of their work group.
_____ 9. Give clear and accurate instructions to others in their work group.
_____ 10. Ask clear questions to obtain needed information from others in their work group.
_____ 11. Understand their role and responsibilities as part of the larger work group effort.
_____ 12. Communicate effectively with people with different cultural backgrounds.
_____ 13. Communicate effectively with people with different professional backgrounds.

Table 1

Small group communication skills in order of magnitude of respondent agreement.

M/SD[1]	Communication Skill
4.83 (.373)	Listen effectively; be able to discern important elements of others' messages to them.
4.53 (.506)	Understand their role and responsibilities as part of the larger work group effort.
4.47 (.557)	Be an active contributing member of a problem solving work group discussion on a familiar topic.
4.45 (.555)	Ask clear questions to obtain needed information from others in their work group.
4.43 (.547)	Establish and maintain good professional rapport with others in the work group.
4.42 (.599)	Communicate effectively with people with different cultural backgrounds.
4.37 (.714)	Use clear, concise, accurate and professional language when speaking to others in their work group.
4.36 (.532)	Communicate effectively with people with different professional backgrounds.
4.32 (.775)	Give clear and accurate instructions to others in their work group.
4.24 (.542)	Nonverbally convey a professional image to others in their work group (such as appropriate grooming and attire, good posture, etc.).
4.18 (.730)	Recognize and aid in the resolution of conflicts within the work group.
4.03 (.716)	Receive information on a familiar topic and transmit an accurate summary of that information to members of their work group.
4.00 (.698)	Give a brief, clear, coherent and well-organized informative presentation on a familiar topic to members of their work group.

[1] Mean; Standard Deviation; N=38.